

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Two - Realistic Fiction/Social Action Fiction

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Unit Two – Realistic Fiction/Social Action Fiction

October/November

Reading and Writing Project has rethought the fiction unit somewhat this year to get students into their stories at a faster pace, limit their stories to two to three central small moments, start raising the quality of their writing right away, and reserve a few days at the end so students have a chance to compose a new story and apply all they've learned with a sense of efficiency, fluency, and independence.

We suggest that you lean on a couple of books. Randy Bomer's *Time for Meaning* is an indispensable guidebook to thinking through fiction writing. You'll also find the grammar lessons in Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton's *The Power of Grammar* to be helpful for your students as they are revising and editing. If your students are new to fiction, the book, *Writing Fiction: Big Dreams, Tall Ambitions*, from the Heinemann *Units of Study* series will be helpful as well. You'll also find the new *Narrative Writing Continuum* helpful.

What Standards This Unit Addresses

This unit particularly addresses Common Core writing standard 3, including its sub-standards. The standards for narrative writing are particularly high, and your students will need to draw upon and extend their prior narrative skills in order to engage the reader, provide an organizational structure that sequences events, develop characters, and provide closure. The RWP asks students to do even more - we ask them to focus on pivotal moments in their narratives, and to apply the same close reading strategies to their own narratives, that they do to reading literature (standard 2 in particular, discerning central ideas, lessons, and themes).

Approaching This Unit with Clear Goals - The Role of Assessment and On-Demand Writing

You will always want to begin any unit by considering what your students can already do so that you can adjust your teaching with this data in hand. There are two easy ways to get a birds-eye view of your students' current narrative skills. One is to use the on-demand narrative that you may have asked all your students to write as the post-assessment at the close of your first unit of study, in which you taught students to raise the level of their personal narrative. Alternatively, you can ask your students to demonstrate their skills at fiction writing at the start of this, your second unit of study, by asking them to do a new on-demand narrative, this time writing a 'small moment' or 'scene' of a fiction story instead of a personal narrative, using all they know about narrative craft and structure to do so. Either way, you will want to abstain from coaching into your students' work, reminding them of the characteristics of effective narrative writing, so that you can see what they know and do without your scaffolding. You may, however, also be interested in what they can do after being reminded of the qualities of effective narratives and after being shown an exemplar text—in which case you might devote a second day of your unit to a flash revision of the on-demand writing. Either way, once you collect on-demand narrative

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writing from your students, you'll want to study their work and make some decisions about how you are going to look at it.

One way to look at on-demand writing is for you to glance at every piece, thinking about what each child is now doing well as a writer, carefully considering future conferences and small groups. If you do decide to peruse every on-demand, then be sure to include your students in this assessment, so that they have a meaningful opportunity to reflect on how they have grown as writers from the start of the school year until the end of the first unit. Of course, this will set them up to engage in similar self-assessment after this unit. You'll find the RWP *Narrative Writing Continuum* on our website at www.readingandwritingproject.com. It is, of course, carefully aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), although it also asks for expectations which are not delineated in the CCSS but which we believe are essential. You can, of course, alter this. You will also want to make your own student facing version of this. Plan to give students an opportunity to lay their on-demand from before the unit of study next to the one they produce after the unit of study. They can annotate their pieces for what they've done well as writers; they can compare their work with their partner's. This kind of reflection is invaluable for students.

Because you, as a middle school teacher, may be supporting over a hundred students, you may decide it is not reasonable for you to look closely at a pre- and post on-demand (as well as drafts and published pieces) from all these students. That said, Doug Reeves has argued that the most effective feedback is that given while students are in the midst of learning to do something, not after they are finished—so if you are going to give individual attention, giving it to initial on-demands in ways that shape students' next steps is probably more valuable than giving extensive feedback to work once the unit is over.

Another way to look at your on demands, and calibrate them with the RWP Narrative Writing Continuum, is to thin slice, as Gladwell describes in *Blink*. At the start of the unit, you may look over work from a sampling of students, representing the range of writers in your classroom, in order to understand the issues many are dealing with and to plan whole and small group instruction.

This unit assumes that your students tend to be working at or approaching levels 5 and 6 on the Narrative Learning Progression (remember level 6 means end-of-the-year for sixth grade) so if you find your students are not working in that range, you will probably want to borrow from the fourth grade RWP narrative unit (the fifth grade one assumes a great deal of prior experience). If your students really struggle with plot and story tension, you might also borrow a bend on the unit from the third grade version of this unit, which emphasizes 'edge-of-the-seat' craft and structure. On the other hand, if your students show that they are already matched to the level 7 of the *Narrative Writing Continuum*, then you might consider looking at the eighth grade Historical Fiction unit of study.

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Bend One – Setting Goals, and Trying Out Ideas and Scenes

After students work on their on-demand writing, you'll want to support them in setting goals as writers. This may include work not only with student-facing rubrics but also with a mentor text or two. Students can also look at the sample texts that are included in the Narrative Learning Progression, as these texts can give them concrete goals to work towards.

After this drumroll to the unit, you will want to launch your students into writing stories without lingering for very long. Writers learn by actually writing. You'll of course need to teach them strategies for generating and weighing ideas for possible stories they could write, but we caution you against letting that work consume more than two days. Slow down their choice of story just long enough (two days) to give you a chance to confer or lead small groups with many of your students so that you can make sure that no one chooses a story that will be impossibly long, or in which you can already see danger signs of incoherence. Of course, you can draw on any strategies you know to help students generate ideas for stories they might write. Students will come to your classroom with an armload of such strategies from previous years, and you'll want to remind them that writers always draw on everything they know. You will also, however, want to raise the suggestion that their stories might reflect social issues that are important in the world. This is one way the sixth grade fiction unit differs from grade 4—the unit invites students to develop stories in which the plots revolve around a social issue such as bullying, teasing, divorce, that are often central to the stories kids are reading at this grade as well. We define social issue, for this purpose, as an issue that troubles others as well as ourselves—and it's outside of ourselves, that is, it's not related to a character flaw or internal struggle, but to something in the world around us.

But again, there is no need for all writers to write from social issues. One way we might begin, therefore, might be to teach students to use everything they know about generating personal narrative ideas: "Writers return to moments of trouble in their own lives. They get ideas for fiction, just as they get ideas for personal narratives and essays, by paying attention to the moments and issues in their own lives." Some writers find it helpful to jot a list of Issues/Small Moments, to stir up their memories and help them recall moments when certain troubles came to the surface. Others like to jot what happened in a small moment, and explain how their narrative characters will react differently—fiction writers get to change what happens!

As soon as your students have jotted a couple of ideas, you will want to offer them two ways they can rehearse a story idea. One is to write a kind of small summary, or blurb—like what we might read on the jacket of a book. Another is to try out a scene. Often the trouble scene is a good one to try, as it crystallizes what a story might really be about. Give your students the same advice Stephen King gives in *On Writing*—that writers need a plot, and the easiest way to get there, is to put your character in a "situation." As your students try out a few small moments, go ahead already and offer up a revision strategy of trying the same scene from different points of view. Simply switching from first to third person can create more vivid storytelling angle for the

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fiction writer -and it helps young writers imagine how their characters might respond differently to trouble than we ourselves do.

At the RWP, we have found that if students are slow to come up with plot ideas or social issues, this may be more of a reflection of their reading work than anything else. Kids who have been talking about themes, lessons, and issues in fiction for many years, get that their own stories will also center on themes, lessons, and issues. You might gather some kids who need more support coming up with ideas, and teach them: "Sometimes writers create walls, or graffiti boards, of the issues we've identified in the books we've read. Then we think about which of these issues (fitting in, cheating, divorce, lying, responsibility, and so on), we have any personal experience with. We can circle any that we have small moments for, and use those small moments to start our story.

Remind students, as well, to use their own lives as inspiration for their characters and their settings. Walter Dean Myers got his inspiration for his books by thinking back to his childhood: In his memoir, *Bad Boy*, he writes: "Thinking back to boyhood days, I remember the bright sun on Harlem streets, the easy rhythms of black and brown bodies, the sound of students streaming in and out of red brick tenements. I remember playing basketball in Morningside Heights until it was too dark to see the basket and then climbing over the fence to go home...I write a lot about basketball, and I've played basketball for years and years. I was in the Army and I wrote *Fallen Angels*. I lived in Harlem and I write about Harlem." Your writers might try a scene where they have a character who likes the music they like, does the things they do, lives in a neighborhood they know, struggles with some of the things they struggle with.

Throughout the first few days of your unit, the RWP stresses how important it is to emphasize that students will be writing summaries of how their stories might go *and* small moments or scenes they are trying out, not the entire stories themselves. They might try scenes in first and third person, to get a feeling for how the point of view changes as the narrative stance changes. They might try out some settings, to get a sense of where their story takes place. Remind them to apply the narrative skills they know to their scenes. We use the narrative craft we know to 'show don't tell' as we write, using dialogue, detail, inner thinking, and action to craft the scene. By the end of the second day, kids should have written a few summaries and several small scenes.

Bend Two – Rehearsal Within the Story

After rehearsing some story ideas and scenes, students should be ready to choose their story idea and commit to the central situation, character, and setting. Then they're ready to start rehearsing and planning more specifically. The RWP has offered several options for rehearsal in the past: One way is by writing blurbs (book jackets), another is by jotting time lines and story mountains, a third is by using storytelling booklets or storyboards, and a fourth is by telling a version of a story to our partner. You might, of course, still offer all these methods. We've found that time lines have led to too many scenes, and that really, what we want to do is get students into either two or at the most three scenes. Instead, you might want to teach your writers that writers often

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think of a story as having three parts: One part where we meet the characters and find out about the setting, as well as hints of the problem; one part where the problem is developed and choices are made; and one part that shows change and/or resolution. It's often helpful to have students do quick mini-sketches in boxes of the three parts of their story, labeling the setting, the characters, and the action. This work gives you a chance to quickly circulate, making sure kids are composing stories they'll be able to write.

Many teachers set a few constraints on writers, having learned what works best from previous years. You can choose whatever constraints make sense to you. Here are some possibilities the RWP has found to work: stories work best if the characters are approximately the same age as the writer (this prevents the getting married, having quintuplets stories); short stories work best if there are no more than two or three main characters (this way the writer can develop characters); stories work best if none of the names used (or characters developed) are students within the class; stories work best if they can be told within two or three major scenes or small moments, at the most, each involving not more than approximately an hour of time. Of course, that list is open to debate, and you will need to decide if these make sense for you and your classroom.

Some teachers in RWP classrooms also use this time to have students plan what kind of craft and structure they most want to work on and get feedback on. That is, some students might set goals to focus on developing a strong sense of problem and resolution, or problem and change. Or they might want to focus on character development. Or they may focus particularly on developing the theme, moral, or lesson. We do this not just because it's challenging for middle school teachers to give feedback to over a hundred writers—it's also so that students are setting their own goals as writers, applying what they already know about narrative, and striving to meet those goals. Making sure that they articulate goals can be useful for you and for the students.

You probably won't move right into drafting yet, though. You'll want to spend a little time rehearsing within the story boundaries. Once writers have a story idea in mind, they can rehearse for that story idea by thinking about any one of several dimensions of a story. They could, for example, think next about the plot, about the setting, or about the characters. If your writers are especially advanced and already have a repertoire of ways to think about these elements, you could issue a generous invitation to them at this point, saying, "Writers, you have a couple of days to rehearse for your stories. Let's recall all the ways you already know for rehearsing. Now I'm going to tell, you: you are the boss of your writing. Then you could, if you wished, convene a small group to work with the writers who elected to think first about, say, their characters (or their setting, or their plot).

If your writers still benefit from you scaffolding them, you might at this point suggest that usually writers rehearse for the stories by spending some time developing characters. They can write small scenes with this character. If the story involves an argument that takes place at the protagonist's locker, for example, the writer might develop the protagonist's character by writing a little scene that shows the character opening her locker, shuffling past the...what? What is in

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there? The character is reaching into her locker in order to get the...what? The stuff that the writer puts into that locker will reveal the character. The way the character thinks and acts as she opens her locker will reveal her, too.

Then, too, in small groups and conferences you will want to help writers think about characters relationship to the central trouble, or situation, or plot. Is the character a victim, a perpetrator, or a witness? What does the character want and how will the story show those desires or dreams? How will the character change? Call to mind favorite stories as you lead your students in jotting small scenes with their characters. When students were younger, they will have studied *Those Shoes*, in which the main character wants the shoes that are accepted by the peer group—but what the character really wants is friends. In the end, of course, the character does not get the shoes he wants, but he does get a friend. In Eve Bunting's *Your Move*, James and Isaac want many things—to be safe in their neighborhood, to please their mother, to fit into the gang culture they encounter—and to escape that gang culture. Middle school students experience complicated pressures, and the characters in their stories can help them think through those pressures and what's inside characters that helps them respond to these pressures.

As your writers set out to draft the parts of their story, it's often helpful to have them not just rehearse in parts but draft in parts. A typical problem that young fiction writers face is the difficulty of 'getting to the problem.' Any teacher who has looked bemusedly at seven pages of hand-written story, that is the writer's 'first scene, where nothing has happened yet,' knows these writers would benefit from Stephen King's advice to get to the situation! You might, therefore, suggest that writers draft their 'problem scene' first—the one where the character faces the central problem. Later, some writers will do a scene before this one, where they introduce the characters and give hints of the problem, or rising tension. But some writers will stick with just two scenes, or small moments. What you are trying to avoid is writers spending all their stamina on part of the story where nothing happens. The RWP suggests this is a good time to look at how some of the stories you've read aloud *start*—because most authors get to the trouble fast.

As your writers set out to draft, don't wait to teach them some ways to work on their writing. Go ahead and teach some "raising the quality" of narrative lessons as they draft the parts of their story. You might teach students to close their notebooks once they are ready to draft, so they don't just copy what's already there. Remind them to apply all they know about narrative writing—have the chart out from personal narrative. Perhaps have them tell their partner what the central issue is that they are writing about, and how that issue will affect the plot.

You could also turn to some grammar work - not saving that for editing, but showing students how writers think about grammar as they write. You might, for instance, teach them that: "Writers try out tenses as we draft. We may try our first scene, for instance, in past tense and present tense, writing a little bit and then reading it aloud to a partner and listening for the different tone. Once we decide on a tense, we pay attention to our verb forms to try to hold to the intended tense."

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If your writers are somewhat experienced, don't wait for significant revision. You might have them try several leads for the story—while they are still writing the first scene. Sometimes trying beginning several different ways, can open up to new ideas for the writer. Any stories you've read aloud can be helpful tools as kids try this work.

Bend Three – Deep Revision

You will find that once kids have an idea for how their story will go, they will be champing at the bit not only to get started but to write the whole story. You won't want to hold them back, but you will want to be sure that before they are out of the starting gate, you have shown them texts that resemble those you hope they will write. Before drafting begins, invite them to spend a bit of time studying some touchstone texts. Try to find texts that are centered around just two or, at the most, three small moments (or episodes).

One way to approach a study of mentor texts is to first help your students learn to read like a writer. Teach them to find places in the text that move them and to name specifically what the author is doing, and then find other places in the text in which the author replicates that move. The author will have done a bit of craftsmanship to create an effect. Students can become strong in naming the effect, and they might decide they want to create the same effect at a particular place in their own text. It is important for students to learn the purpose for specific writing-craft moves.

For example, If students are reading near or at grade level (benchmark for September was V/W for sixth grade), they are likely encountering setting descriptions that convey an emotional tone as well as a physical location: Support your writers in trying out some of this work in their own stories. Many students are likely reading novels that employ metaphors and symbolism—this could be an opportunity to teach stronger writers to incorporate these devices into their storytelling, only in the service of character development or theme work, not merely as an exercise.

You might also lean on student writing as mentor texts. There are samples available on our website at www.readingandwritingproject.com, and with the RWP *Narrative Writing Continuum*. Or perhaps you can use some of your past students' writing, the entries from collecting or minibooklets from planning. Use writing samples that represent different ability levels so that you are differentiating your instruction.

Continually ask yourself whether students are remembering all that you taught during the personal narrative work. If not, act dumbfounded: "How can it be?" Suggest students get their published pieces from Unit One and reference them as they write more entries. "Your published piece should remind you of what you can do as a writer," you might say.

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As your students work on drafting their stories, you can teach them strategies that fiction writers rely upon to control time and to animate every scene with action and setting. Many students develop a setting for the first scene, but don't give any hint of setting in other scenes. Demonstrate how to develop the setting, including how the character feels in that place, across the story.

Often students benefit from some support with dialogue in their stories. Typically, middle school writers will insert a lot of dialogue—and they will do it as if they are writing a diary. Every thing a character says will show up. You'll want to teach them to be more deliberate, to use dialogue to show characters' traits and emotions, or to increase tension by escalating the conflict.

Somewhere in here, you want to ask your writers to put down the draft they have been writing, to consider what they've learned from mentor texts, the various leads they've tried, and most importantly, what they think they are trying to teach in this story—and they should write a fresh draft. Too often, young writers tinker with a draft, adding little bits of writing here and there. The RWP wants them writing one to two pages a day, always at their strongest level. Have them plan with a partner what they most want to accomplish as writers, invite them to close their notebooks and folders, and have them draft afresh.

With this fresh draft, it's a good time to look at two big issues the RWP has noticed at this point. One is endings. Oftentimes in student drafts, the character magically receives his or her fondest dream in the form of a solution that flies in out of nowhere like a Disney movie. Likewise, usually when kids embark on a story, they plan for the main character to fight the bully, make the team, find a best friend, fix the divorce. All you need to do is to ask kids whether life always turns out that way. When life doesn't turn out as we hoped, that's when people dig down inside and surprise and outgrow themselves. That's when the real inner action occurs. If teachers encourage kids to rethink pat, easy endings, those kids will not only learn about writing-to-discover, they will also learn that people grow through times of difficulty and that whenever a door closes, often there is a window somewhere that remains open. With your help, students can see that the solutions writers find in fiction—as in life—are generally those that we find ourselves.

The second issue to look at will be paragraphing. Some students learned long ago that paragraphs start with a topic sentence, and they don't really know much about narrative paragraphs. You might do a quick inquiry, sending students back to their mentor texts, to figure out when and why authors generally insert new paragraphs in fiction. It won't take them long to figure out it's often when the setting or time changes, when a new character speaks, or when the action or mood changes. Before students set out to type or copy their pieces, have them look at them with the eye of paragraphs.

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Bend Four – Publishing

Finally, at the conclusion of the unit, you'll want to create opportunities for your writers to publish their writing. You may decide to invite students to publish their stories as picture books, in which case you can give some time now to studying picture books and the role of the images in capturing the tone of a page (when the pages are abstract), in illustrating a pivotal moment, and in extending the text. Or you may invite writers to sort their stories into some thematic short-story anthologies, which will then be available in the classroom for read-aloud and independent reading. Definitely make time for authors to read their stories to younger audiences, peers, and families. Honor kids' writing publicly and in lasting ways.

We at the RWP have found this honoring also puts demand on the writer, because he or she has to think of audience. That means it's time to consider word processing, spelling, usage, and punctuation. You may find that this work is best done in small groups, and that you want to have some editing centers that kids can visit. Definitely develop a rubric that kids can refer to, so they know what conventions they are held accountable for, such as punctuating dialogue, and capitalization. They'll want to publish their best work, so use this opportunity to instill a sense of determination to master conventions.

This year, we also invite you to let kids show off in a different way. So far, they've done a lot of writing, and some deep revision. The students should know a lot about how to come up with ideas for realistic fiction, how to rehearse and plan, how to draft wisely and revise thoughtfully. We suggest that you give kids two or three periods to do just this. You might lean on Colleen Cruz's *Independent Writing*, and organize writing groups so that kids can support each other. These days will give you a chance to really see what your kids have become independent at—and they'll have an opportunity to show off their skills. Consider this final piece a kind of 'on-demand' fiction narrative. Your students and you can put it next to your pre-assessment, and revel in what they've learned.

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